

Show Game: Excerpt

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 17

ALEX

I have the bastard, finally, I got him. Target number one. He's cowering on the high-backed chair before me, in the near dark. We keep a single harsh light on him, a bare caged bulb hanging from one of the rafters, just above his eyes, still swinging a little. He'd tried standing twice and bumped into the bulb before my hard eyes made him drop right down again.

It was so easy. We have duct tape and various tools of the trade in a tactical backpack and are more than happy to use them. But he doesn't even need taping up. He's clenching the chair's cracked leather so hard his knuckles are whiter than those pricey snow-white crowns of his. It can't help that his seat resembles a dentist chair.

"You tricked me," he keeps repeating. "I trusted you."

"Sound familiar?" I say and let the question hang in the air a good minute. To see how he likes it done to him. I'll let him fill in the rest, going back decades.

Oh, before we get too far—I will be known as "Alex." It's my vigilante name, for my first-ever job. I'm speaking to my target in a lower, rougher voice to help cover myself.

Dwayne Specklin, forty-nine and quivering before us, is the founder and head pastor of one of the largest megachurches in southern California, let alone the country. But before that, before he was "ordained," he was a scoutmaster and Scout unit chaplain for many, many years. So many boys had put their trust in him.

You might see where this is going. But I'll let Dwayne Specklin tell you, and soon.

We're in a warehouse in San Diego. It's only minutes from the surf and the palms and so many retired admirals' young grandsons, but inside here it's cold enough to be the Pacific Northwest. Up north, I'd found out, was where Dwayne had escaped justice after molesting his first ten-year-old, a lowly Cub Scout. All Dwayne had to do back then was abscond for college.

On one side of Dwayne is an aluminum briefcase, silver and dinged up, displayed upright on an old music stand. It holds video of him with boys, ready to roll on an old and unregistered iPad. Sick and vile footage. I won't tell you what Dwayne was doing to those boys. After months of trying, I'd gotten the video from one of his accomplices—a junior pastor.

Dwayne has to know what's inside the briefcase. It's bathed in a red glow from the color lens of the military-grade LED flashlight mounted to our tripod.

He keeps glaring at the metal case like it's a bomb ticking down to one.

Then I raise the handheld voice changer to my mouth. He recoils at the sight.

“Are you ready?” I say in my newly digitally warped tone. He releases a little yelp.

“Ah, now . . .” I come in close and lean down to him, just like he as Scout chaplain might have done while visiting another troubled boy at home, in a time of such dire need and defenselessness. I even stroke his plump knee gently. A heat of disgust swells in my throat.

“Are you ready?” I repeat. “It’s time to play the Show Game.”

“The wha? . . .” Dwayne’s eyes widen.

I don’t answer. In my planning, I decided to reverse the wording of “Game Show.” Let him figure it out. It’s barely afternoon. We’ve got all day and night.

I let Dwayne squint around a few moments, first at the briefcase again, then around the whole room. All he is going to find, if his bleary, puffy eyes can adjust enough, is our dim corner of an old machine shop, its only windows opening to a fully dark former manufacturing hall, both now gutted. Then there’s a cavernous warehouse surrounding that, and on and on, like some Russian doll of those abandoned factory locations from the season finales of thriller shows. I look around along with Dwayne, following his eyes and scrunched-up nose. We see corrugated metal walls, busted windows, jagged exposed bolts sawed off, and gaping holes and hatches to who knows where. Grease stains, oily puddles left from somewhere, something.

I flinch inside a moment, wondering what might have first activated my target’s depraved mind. Maybe a Scout leader or priest had committed the same abuse on Dwayne, or even his own father? Maybe Dwayne, deep down, has the same developmental age as the ones he deceives and abuses.

Who knows. Screw him.

Dwayne is looking up now, as you do, probably seeking that megachurch god he justified his crimes to—if he even bothered. But all he can probably see is the white glare of that bare bulb, and he sniffs and snorts, and his nostrils surely fill with the tang of stale oil and dead insects and the boozy metallic fear breath of his own bastard self.

Target number one is ready to play. My first contestant! I have to admit, I feel a little swell of happy warmth in my chest. I cannot reiterate how easy this has been, especially for my first. To help ease Dwayne’s stage jitters, we have a bottle of Old Taylor, ten bucks plus tax at the nearby Vons. We had offered him a paper cup, but he drank straight from the bottle despite claiming to be a lifelong teetotaler. And I was all too happy to corrupt him. The booze had made him gasp and emit a wheezing trill that left him breathing heavy and drooling. Then the tears started running down his cheeks. I was expecting vomit soon. I’d remembered to wear my waterproof boots just in case.

Talk about drinking to forget. It was far too late for that, though. Because I’m here to make Dwayno remember. Total recall.

Time to play.

“Dwayne?”

“Yes. No,” he says. “I’m not ready. I don’t get it! Who are you?”

What do you want?"

"I want you to tell me what you did."

"Did?"

"You know. All of it. And do not lie. Because we will know."

His eyes go dead a moment. Silence ensues. He stares at his white knuckles. His face flashes green. I see it coming so I move back with a quick little two-step and the stream of hot vomit gushes out straight for the industrial floor drain we'd conveniently placed the chair near. He misses himself but it splatters, then it dribbles down the front of his pearlescent, still tucked-in golf shirt. Thank god he wipes at his chin because I'm not going to keep staring at that in this harsh downward light.

It's such a contrast to the public Dwayne Specklin, a rotund if not fleshy fellow with pale pink skin that you never would've guessed spent much of its adult life in sunny California. His full head of hair somehow still more blond than gray, and a little spiky. His look reminds me of a jokey football coach, capable of either great care or extreme pressure within seconds.

He always had this little upturned grin in all those official photos and videos I researched, just one side of his mouth, but without that grin he truly does look like the eternally enabled child molester that he is. I wonder if he'd trained himself in the mirror at some point. He's still wearing the pricey kangaroo leather sandals he had on when we'd approached him, his feet and toes soft and pedicured with a nearly white gloss.

He squints at me, and at the metal case again, then around. Squints, case, around. This repeats for like a minute.

"Who sent you?" he says finally.

Nobody sent me. I sent myself. Let him wonder why. This should be for all the victims. Let Dwayne Specklin mine his foul and barbed memory until blind.

[Chapter continues...]